

DIVERSITY NEWS

July 2006

Yvonne: According to a public opinion poll conducted by the American Psychological Association, two-thirds of American workers say that their job is a significant source of stress for them. And one out of every FOUR workers surveyed admits to having called in sick—or taken a "mental health day"—as a result of job-related stress.

Thomas: Job-related stress is also a significant concern for EMPLOYERS, since it costs U.S. businesses approximately 300 BILLION dollars a year in terms of absenteeism, diminished productivity, employee turnover, and direct medical, legal, and insurance fees.

Yvonne: Concerned about attracting and retaining high-quality employees—and keeping employee morale high—some companies have implemented practices designed to integrate employee goals of health and well-being with organizational goals of performance and productivity.

Thomas: In this month's edition of Diversity News, we'll look at the ways in which companies can create for their employees "a psychologically healthy work environment."

Yvonne: Since 1999, psychological associations in the United States and Canada, with support from the American Psychological Association, have presented "Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards." These awards honor organizations that have made a commitment to programs and policies which foster employee health and well-being—while enhancing organizational performance and productivity.

In 2003, the American Psychological Association (the A-P-A) launched the Best Practices Honors, to recognize at a NATIONAL level the efforts of state-level winners with particularly innovative programs and policies. And in 2006, the APA presented its first annual National Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards, the winners of which were also selected from previous state-level winners.

For the "Psychologically Healthy Workplace Awards," applicants are evaluated on their policies and practices in the following five areas:

Employee Involvement ...
Work/Life Balance ...
Employee Growth and Development ...
.Health and Safety ...
and Employee Recognition.

Additional factors that are considered include employee attitudes and opinions ...

the role of communication in the organization ...
and benefits realized in terms of employee health and well-being and organizational performance.

Thomas: Efforts to increase EMPLOYEE INVOLVEMENT empower workers, involve them in decision making, and give them increased job autonomy. Examples of employee involvement include:

Self-managed work teams; ...
Employee committees or task forces; ...
Continuous improvement teams; ...
Participative decision making; ...
And employee suggestion forums.

Programs and policies that facilitate WORK/LIFE BALANCE acknowledge that employees have responsibilities and lives outside of work. These programs and policies help individuals better manage these multiple demands. Examples include:

Flexible work arrangements (such as flextime and telecommuting); ...
Assistance with childcare and eldercare; ...
Resources to help employees manage personal financial issues; ...
Benefits for family members and domestic partners; ...
And flexible leave options.

Opportunities for EMPLOYEE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT help employees expand their knowledge, skills and abilities, and apply the competencies they have gained to new situations. Examples include:

Continuing education courses; ...
Tuition reimbursement; ...
Career development or counseling services; ...
Skills training; opportunities for promotion and internal career advancement; ...
And coaching, mentoring, and leadership development programs.

HEALTH AND SAFETY INITIATIVES include a wide variety of workplace practices that can help employees improve their physical and mental health and effectively manage stress. Examples include:

Training and safeguards that address workplace safety and security issues; ...
Incentives for developing healthy lifestyles; ...
Adequate health insurance, including MENTAL health coverage; ...
Access to health, fitness, and recreation facilities; ...
And employee assistance programs to help employees address life problems.

EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION efforts reward employees both individually and collectively for their contributions to the organization. Recognition can take various forms, formal

and informal, monetary and non-monetary. Ways of recognizing employee contributions include:

Fair monetary compensation; ...
Competitive benefits packages; ...
Acknowledgement of contributions and milestones; ...
Performance-based bonuses and pay increases; ...
Employee awards;
And recognition ceremonies.

Yvonne: Communication plays a key role in the success of any workplace program or policy and serves as the foundation for all five types of psychologically healthy workplace practices. Communication about workplace practices helps achieve the desired outcomes for the employee and the organization in a variety of ways:

Bottom-up communication (from employees to management) provides information about employee needs, values, perceptions and opinions. This helps organizations select and tailor their programs and policies to meet the specific needs of their employees.

Top-down communication (from management to employees) can increase utilization of specific workplace programs by making employees aware of their availability, clearly explaining how to access and use the services, and demonstrating that management supports and values the programs.

Examples of communication strategies include:

Providing regular, on-going opportunities for employees to provide feedback to management. Communication vehicles may include employee surveys, suggestion boxes, town hall meetings, individual or small group meetings with managers, and an organizational culture that supports open, two-way communication.

Making the goals and actions of the organization and senior leadership clear to workers by communicating key activities, issues and developments to employees and developing policies that facilitate transparency and openness.

Assessing the needs of employees and involving them in the development and implementation of psychologically healthy workplace practices.

Using multiple channels of communication to inform employees of the IMPORTANCE of a psychologically healthy workplace.

Leading by example; that is, by encouraging key organizational leaders to participate in psychologically healthy workplace activities in ways that are visible to employees.

And communicating to ALL members of the organization information about the successful outcomes of specific psychologically healthy workplace practices.

Thomas: How does an organization establish a positive culture? According to the Senn-Delaney Leadership Group, there are eleven critical factors necessary for an organization to create and sustain a desired culture. These include:

Creating a shared vision; ...

Ensuring that senior leaders are committed to the process and model agreed-upon behaviors; ...

Defining the guiding behaviors that support the organization's values; ...

Conducting a gap analysis (by way of a cultural audit); ...

Establishing the BUSINESS case for needed change; ...

Creating a culture of coaching, rich in feedback; ...

Remembering that TRUE behavioral change occurs at the emotional level, not intellectual level; ...

Remembering that change requires a critical mass to overcome old behaviors; ...

Aligning support systems to reinforce the desired culture; ...

Establishing an environment that supports and nurtures two-way communication; ...

and Creating a diverse workplace in which employee differences and similarities are valued.

Creating a shared vision with all employees is a critical first step. A shared vision helps reduce resistance to change and enables all employees to contribute to success.

Demonstrating empathy, providing support, increasing communication, and creating opportunities for participation in establishing and maintaining the vision are methods for engaging employees.

For a positive culture to survive and thrive, leaders in the organization need to exhibit certain behaviors. For example:

Tuning in to the current culture ...

Challenging prevailing wisdom ...

Communicating a compelling vision ...

Building coalitions of support ...

Transferring ownership to work teams ...

And persevering.

But leaders can't create a positive culture all by themselves. They must provide the necessary conditions for sustaining momentum. These include

Providing financial and human resources ...

Identifying competencies required for success in the envisioned culture ...

And establishing reinforcing policies by linking REWARDS to desired BEHAVIORS.

It is critical for senior leadership in an organization to recognize that cultural change is not a quick-fix or a short-term program, but rather a process that may take several years. AND, transforming the current culture to the envisioned culture may create

tension within the organization. The desire of some employees (including managers) to maintain the status quo can be one of the most challenging obstacles to overcome.

Yvonne: Leadership appears to be the key contributor to the development of a psychologically healthy workplace. Leaders can directly influence morale, retention, commitment, satisfaction, and perceptions of stress.

A variety of approaches exist for leaders to employ in the development of a healthy workplace. For example:

Gathering feedback about strengths and development issues from other senior team leaders, from direct reports, and from internal and external stakeholders.

Conducting annual employee satisfaction surveys to better understand how to change policies, procedures, processes, systems, and management practices to enhance employee satisfaction.

Employing a department-wide “balanced scorecard” to measure and monitor internal customer satisfaction.

Constructively and consistently managing the performance of under-performing employees.

Creating and utilizing employee teams to increase participation of employees in problem solving, decision making, and planning processes.

Analyzing exit interviews for trends and developing strategies to increase retention of high potential talent.

And implementing and supporting work/life balance and family friendly policies, procedures, and programs to enhance engagement; for example, telecommuting, child care, flexible work schedules, and health and wellness programs.

Thomas: If your work environment is NOT psychologically healthy, there are actions that you can take on your own in order to reduce your level of stress.

Some stress reduction programs blend relaxation techniques with diet and exercise guidelines. Others focus on specific issues, such as time management, assertiveness training, and improving social skills.

And here are some other tips for dealing with stress on the job:

Make the most of workday breaks. For example, take a brief walk, chat with a co-worker about a non-work topic, or simply sit quietly with your eyes closed, monitoring your breathing. Even 10 minutes of “personal time” can refresh your mental outlook.

Set reasonable standards for yourself and others: Don't expect perfection.

Talk to your boss about your job description. Your responsibilities and performance criteria may not accurately reflect what you are doing. Working together to make needed changes will not only benefit your emotional and physical health, but also improve overall productivity.

And keep things in perspective; don't make things out to be more important than they really are.

Yvonne: That's all we have for this edition of Diversity News. Be sure to check back with us next month when we'll be taking a look at INCLUSION in the workplace—that is, the ways in which organizations configure opportunity, interaction, communication, and decision-making, in order to exploit the potential of their employees' diversity.

Thomas: Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink. Just send an e-mail message to the address shown below, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

Yvonne: And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also, we want to hear from you! If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at dmeeo@va.gov with the words DIVERSITY NEWS in the subject line.

Until next time...

Both: Have a great month!